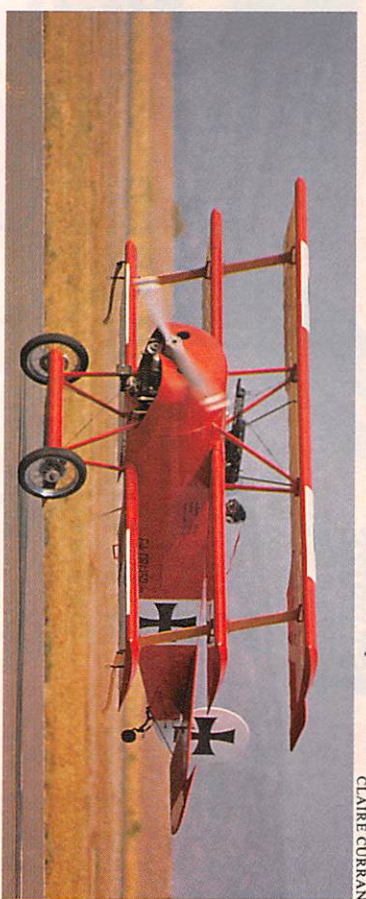
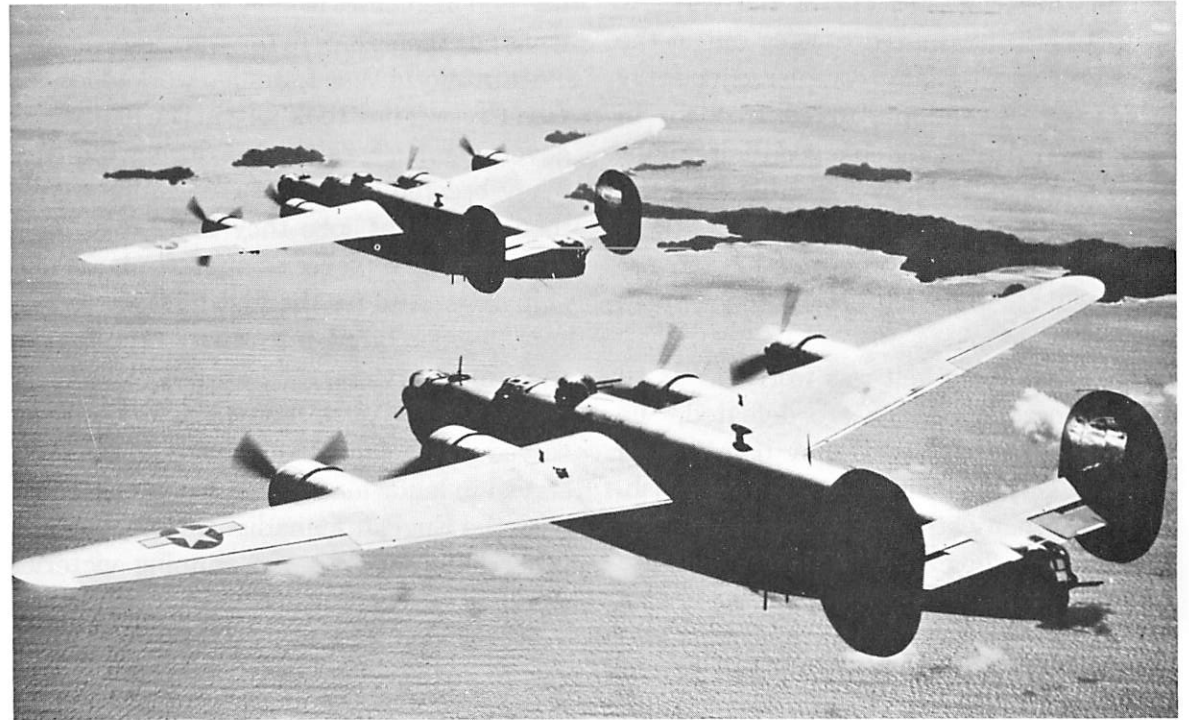


*vintage craft, or replicas like the World War I German Fokker triplane below* CLARE CURRAN



1940



By the time of World War II, methods of warfare had changed greatly. Foot soldiers were still important, but airplanes that could travel far behind enemy lines became a major attacking force. Cities and factories in which weapons were built could be destroyed with bombs.



# LIVING LEGENDS

Restoring World War II vintage planes is an investment in history.

BY FRED MACKERODT, Contributing Editor

**K**ISSIMMEE AIRPORT, 12 miles southwest of Orlando, is unique among the many World War II airfields that dot Florida. Built in 1942, it served as a training base for America's first Stealth airplane, the P-61 Black Widow night fighter. It is, thus, somewhat ironic that although no flying P-61s exist today, Kissimmee

Restored to mint condition, this P-51 is among the fastest piston planes ever to fly.

is still home base for a lot of other operating World War II aircraft.

The airfield is the location of Reilly Aviation and one of the world's finest collections of WWII warbirds, both flying and in the process of restoration. Tom Reilly moves like a man with a mission. It is difficult to tell whether this frenetically active 47-year-old possesses the company with his name on the door or it possesses him.

The human dynamo cautions, "Watch your head," as he ducks under the bomb bay of a Consolidated B-24J Liberator bomber and hauls himself up into the cockpit. I had been told that it was this particular restoration—which is a legend in warbird circles—that did the most to establish Reilly's reputation as



## LIVING LEGENDS

the world's leading rebuilder of flying warbirds. It is the only fully restored flying B-24J in the world. "Took 97,000 hours to rebuild," says the slim entrepreneur, as I struggle into the left seat and begin to fondle the throttles which first fed power in 1944 to the airplane's four 14-cylinder, 1200-hp Pratt & Whitney radials. The flight controls, like the rest of the airplane, look no more than a few months old. "It's probably worth a couple of million today," Reilly says of the 37,000-pound behemoth, "but as history, it's priceless."

He motions for me to look out the side window and down at a vacant space on the right wing where the number two engine is supposed to be. "We're swapping out that engine right now," he says. "She'll be leaving for California soon." Reilly says that the B-24 flies 200 to 300 hours a year between air shows, trundling around the country at a sedate 165 mph. It was originally certified with a 290-

mph top speed. "We never push these engines full-out," he says. "There's no point." No sooner do I get comfortable in the cockpit of the bomber than Reilly is rushing me back down through the bomb bay and into the Florida sunlight. "Watch your . . . Oops!" he says, a split second before I smack my head on a bomb rack. As we emerge, a brightly polished North American P-51 Mustang, with "Crazy Horse" lettered prominently on its cowl, fires up on the ramp, its 1490-hp Rolls-Royce Merlin engine thundering in anticipation. "He's going up for a hop around the patch. Gets \$1250 an hour for rides, but that's probably near what it costs him. It's tough to make money in this business. You've got to love it." It was a ride in another Mustang 18 years ago that originally hooked Reilly on warbirds.

Motioning for me to follow, my guide charges across the ramp, jumps on an airport tug, di-

rects me to sit next to him, and begins to push a North American AT6 trainer back into the hangar to fill the space recently vacated by the liberated Mustang. The "Harvard" was the primary training aircraft in the '40s.

### A hangarful of history

"I like to keep the hangar full," Reilly says. "Give the folks lots to see."

The Reilly Aviation hangar is only part museum. All of the planes in it that aren't being actively restored are flown regularly.

"Hear that?" Reilly asks, jumping off the tug and pointing to the back of the shop where a rivet gun is loudly chattering away reassembling the firewall of an F4U Corsair fighter. "The visitors love to know that they're here



**B-24 LIBERATOR**



**P-40E WARHAWK**



**P-47 THUNDERBOLT**



**F4U-1D CORSAIR**



**P-38 LIGHTNING**

PM PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

PM PHOTO BY BUDD DAVISSON

PM PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

PM PHOTOS BY BUDD DAVISSON



where restorations are actually going on," he says.

Moving purposefully ahead, Reilly points up at a ponderous-looking Grumman TBM Avenger, a huge 3-seat, single-engine, torpedo dive bomber. Even though the carrier-based airplane's huge wings are folded demurely back against its sides, the airplane is no less imposing. "The TBM is the plane George Bush flew as a kid in the war," Reilly says. "Pretty big handful for a 19-year-old, wouldn't you say?"

Walking in front of a North American T-28, a '50s tricycle gear trainer, Reilly calls attention to a puddle of oil under the engine. "Great feature of the round engines," he says only half in jest. "If they're not leaking, you know they're out of oil."

He introduces me to the previous owner of the T-28, a 46-

year-old surgeon who is standing next to the airplane in the hangar. I ask why he sold the airplane. "I'm buying a T-33 this weekend," the doctor says, referring to Lockheed's 2-seat version of the F-80 Shooting Star. Why does he fly warbirds? "It's a challenge," he says, "a very serious business. When you do it right, you become one with the airplane and there's nothing else in the world to equal that feeling." I ask about the expense. "Oh, the T-33 will burn 250 gallons per hour but, really, money is no object when you're talking about these things. If you're lucky enough to be able to own one, then you have to just jump out and grab the opportunity."

Reilly whisks me away, stopping in front of a B-25J Mitchell bomber which, he explains, is about three-quarters of the way through the restoration process. It is the eighth B-25 Reilly has restored, and the type of medium bomber used in the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in April, 1942. "Check this out," he says, pointing up at an intricately and beautifully wired junction box on the wing, just freshly restored. Reaching down, he picks up a large and heavy rat's nest of old wiring harness. "This is the original," he says. "All the old wiring goes. We make all our own harnesses."



**P-51 MUSTANG**



**T-33 T-BIRD**



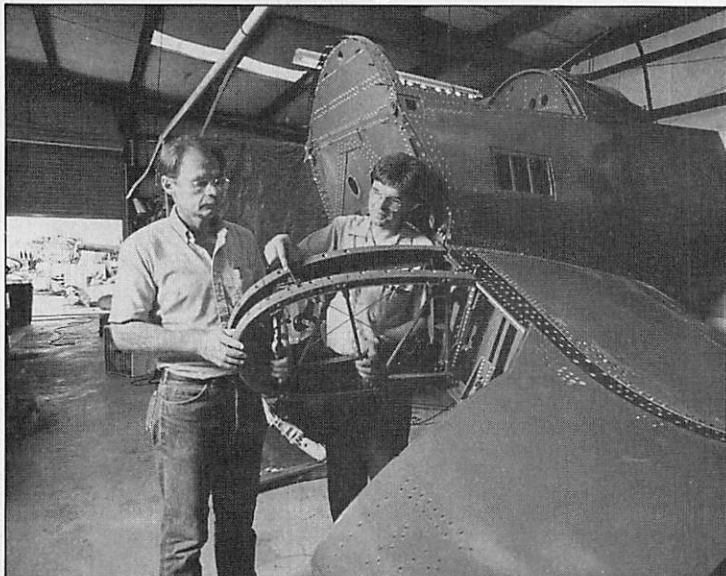
**T-6/SNJ TEXANS**

PM PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

PM PHOTOS BY BUDD DAVISSON



FM PHOTOS BY SKIP GANDY



Reilly sits at the controls of the B-24J (above) that made his reputation. In progress is a rivet-by-rivet rebuild of a Corsair (left). Outside, wreckage found in the Aleutian Islands awaits transformation into a \$3-million P-40 (below center).

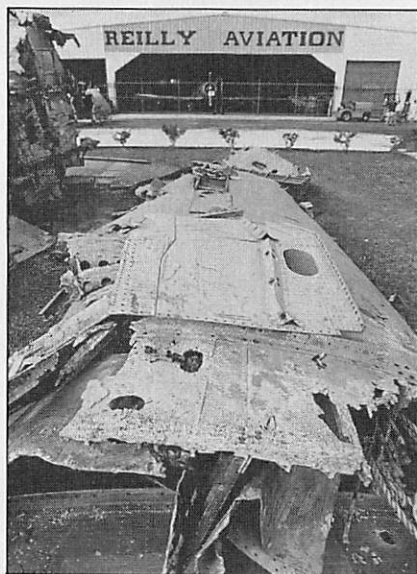
## Better than new

Reilly's arm sweeps the hangar. "The planes we restore here are actually better than new when we're finished with them," the ex-New Jersey native adds. "For one, we do much better corrosion protection. The treatments we have today are much better, plus longevity wasn't a prime consideration when most of these aircraft were built. They were made for a purpose—to win the war—and nobody figured that they'd have to last more than a couple of years at most."

He picks up an aluminum aileron. "We delaminate parts like this to check for corrosion. We drill out all of the rivets and separate the individual layers. If there's too much corrosion, we use the old piece as a pattern to make a new one. It's all tremendously time consuming."

Stopping next to the Corsair, which is in the early stages of restoration but already has its distinctive gull-wing configuration clearly in evidence, Reilly uses both hands to heft a big, newly machined piece of aluminum, part of the wing attachment. "This piece probably took a hundred hours to machine. We have to make a lot of parts like this ourselves," he says. "Even if an outside shop were able to do it, they wouldn't. They wouldn't want the liability."

The Corsair is one of the more popular warbirds. During the war, it was referred to as "the cigar" because of its very long engine compartment, which in one version housed the largest engine ever put in a fighter aircraft up to that time, a 3000-hp Pratt & Whitney Wasp Major with 28 cylinders in four rows. "You have to be careful how you add the power to this airplane," says Reilly who possesses a special unlimited LOA (letter of authorization) from the FAA to fly any high-performance, piston-powered



aircraft made. "Put the spurs to it too fast, and it'll take you sideways real quick."

## Jet fighters from junk

Next to the Corsair sits one of the last to be built of the '50s vintage McDonnell Douglas TA-4J Skyhawk, a 2-seat version of the famous light jet fighter. The one we are looking at entered service in 1972. At 7700 pounds, it was one of the lightest and most popular jet fighter/trainers ever built. "Look at this," Reilly says, his finger tracing a jagged line going down the freshly green-primed fuselage just behind the cockpit. "This is where the government cut this airplane in half when they junked it. They call the junking process 'de-mil-ing.' We bought both pieces and put them back together." Pausing for a few seconds, Reilly adds, "I guess you could call what we do 're-mil-ing.'"

The government junks the jets to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands, says Reilly, so it's

tough to find examples that can be put back together. He points to a wrecked A-4 sitting on a truck, one of 10 of the type on the premises. "I picked that one up in Pensacola just yesterday."

He sees the jet warbirds as the hot area on the current warbird scene.

Already a lot of the Korean and Vietnam era jets are becoming very difficult, if not impossible, to find. "People are putting them together from parts," he says.

How does a person get into warbirds? I ask. "The Experimental Aircraft Association has a great warbird division," Reilly says, "and the Confederate Air Force also does a great job. Even if you don't have a lot of money to spend, you can volunteer to participate in the restorations or the other activities of the clubs. We have a lot of people doing that here. It's a great hobby. You can get up to your elbows in history."

Reilly rushes out the back door of the hangar and into what looks like a junkyard. Hulks of vintage airplanes are recognizable, but mostly there are just piles of parts. It is a fascinating world where trashy-looking chunks of granulated aluminum are coveted like rare jewels.

"Watch those fire ants!" Reilly cautions, as I step over a log and approach the wingless and tailless fuselage of a gutted PB4Y-2 bomber, the Navy version of the B-24 which was used primarily as a surveillance airplane and for antisubmarine warfare. "A guy lived in this thing in the Everglades for 25 years. It's the only B-24 in the world with a jalousie picture window!"

## Risks and rewards

The remains of a burned-out Corsair lie in a heap, its melted engine and contorted prop giving testimony to

(Please turn to page 111)